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# News Release



22 September 2004

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## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Designates Critical Habitat for Bull Trout in Columbia and Klamath River Basins**

Responding to a court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced it is designating approximately 1,748 miles of streams and 61,235 acres of lakes in the Columbia and Klamath River basins of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho as critical habitat for the bull trout under the Endangered Species Act. The Service also recognized conservation and management efforts by states, tribes and agencies.

Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. A designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and only applies to situations where Federal funding, permits, or projects are involved. It does not affect citizens engaged in activities on private land that do not involve a federal agency.

The Service originally proposed designating approximately 18,450 stream miles and approximately 532,700 acres of lakes and reservoirs as critical habitat for the bull trout in November 2002. Today's final designation provides credit for ongoing conservation and management efforts for bull trout that remove the need to designate as much area.

"As a result of the extensive public comment we received on our proposed designation, the Service found there were many areas that already had conservation efforts in place and did not need to be designated," said Dave Allen, regional director of the Service's Pacific Region. "In other areas, the Service found that the social and economic cost of a designation outweighed the conservation benefit."

For example, the Service determined that the State of Washington's Forest Practices Act provided conservation benefits for the bull trout in Washington that are far superior to the benefits provided by a critical habitat designation. The Service also determined the Federal Columbia River Power System has spent \$3.3 billion on restoration of salmon habitat in the river system over the past 20 years, most of which also benefited bull trout, and that conservation efforts by 11 federal agencies that manage portions of the river basin provide protection for the bull trout's habitat. The State of Montana has an ambitious conservation plan to recover the species to a point where it can provide a sport fishery. The State of Idaho has entered into an agreement with the Department of the Interior to protect habitat in the Snake River Basin.

"These efforts provide a good foundation to work towards recovery of the species," Allen said.

In addition to the crediting local governments and agencies for work to protect and restore bull trout habitat, the FWS is designating critical habitat in three states that includes:

- **Oregon:** 706 miles of streams and 33,939 acres of lakes and marshes. All of the lakes and marshes are in the Klamath River basin;
- **Washington:** 737 miles of streams in the Columbia River basin;
- **Idaho:** 306 miles of streams and 27,296 acres of lakes in the Columbia River basin

After proposing critical habitat in November 2002 for bull trout in the Columbia and Klamath river basins, the Service held nine public hearings and numerous public meetings, reviewed 549 written comments from the public and obtained peer review of its proposal from the American Fisheries Society. The public had a total of seven months to review and comment on the critical habitat proposal and the draft economic analysis.

Today's designation is the first of two legally mandated critical habitat designations that will be made for bull trout. In January 2002, the Service and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Friends of the Wild Swan reached a court settlement establishing a schedule for the proposal of critical habitat for bull trout. The two environmental groups had sued the Service for not designating critical habitat when it listed bull trout in 1998 as threatened throughout its range in the lower 48 states.

In response to several requests, and in accordance with the Act, the Service also is conducting a five-year review on the bull trout to determine whether a change in status is warranted. That review is expected to be finished in 2005. Meanwhile, work on a recovery plan for bull trout is on hold until the review to determine whether the species is threatened is complete.

Under the Act, federal agencies must ensure that any activity they fund, carry out or authorize is not likely to destroy or adversely modify a protected species' critical habitat. By consulting with the Service, an agency can usually minimize or avoid any potential conflicts with listed species and their critical habitat, and the proposed project may proceed.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

Conservation of habitat can occur more effectively through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. Voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. The Service is committed to working with all involved and interested parties to protect threatened and endangered species and their habitats.

The Service will publish the final designation for bull trout in the Federal Register in the near future.

Maps, fact sheets, photographs and other materials relating to today's announcement may be found on the Pacific Region's Bull Trout Website at <http://species.fws.gov/bulltrout>. Video of bull trout is available to television stations by calling our Regional External Affairs Office at 503-231-6121.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

### ***FWS***

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